

# Heat help sought for farmers and poor

By Dennis Pollock  
FRESNO BEE

FRESNO - Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger promised in Fresno on Wednesday that he will seek federal assistance to offset losses from a recent heat wave that could cost farmers and dairy operators more than \$1 billion.

Later that day, state officials noted that the governor had already mailed an appeal to Mike Johanns, secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for di-

saster aid and written to Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., to seek her continued lobbying on the state's behalf.

Schwarzenegger said triple-digit temperatures are now believed to have contributed to the deaths of some 30,000 to 35,000 cows, figures that are double previous estimates. The estimate is based on an expected death rate of 2 percent and a cow population estimated conservatively at 1.7 million. He made the announcement after a closed-door meet-

ing with ranchers, farmers and agricultural officials at the Fresno County Farm Bureau.

"I think it's higher than that," said Steve Nash, a Selma dairy farmer who showed the governor around his operation before Schwarzenegger visited the Farm Bureau.

Separately, the governor joined U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein in a letter to President Bush requesting the release of

► HEAT, Page D2

## ► FROM PAGE D1

funds that help low-income residents to insulate their homes and pay electricity bills associated with running air conditioners.

In past years in which California has requested these emergency energy funds, it has received between \$5 million and \$12 million, according to Lloyd Throne, director of the state Department of Community Services and Development.

If approved, the emergency funds would add to the \$91 million already granted the state this year for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

Agricultural officials are only now coming up with statistics on their losses. Fresno County calculated its loss of beef, turkeys, chickens, dairy animals and milk production at nearly \$85 million.

Dennis Plann, deputy agricultural commissioner for Fresno County, said \$73 million of that figure is from lost milk production. Some 58,000 turkeys and 270,000 chickens are believed to have died.

Plann, who has been with the agriculture department for 34 years, said it was the greatest loss for dairy operators that he has ever seen.

Agricultural commissioners also said they continue to calculate the extent of crop damage.

Schwarzenegger said he will send California Department of Food and Agriculture Secretary A.G. Kawamura to Washington, D.C., later this week to meet with Johanns and other federal offi-

cials and lobby for the governor's disaster designation request. The governor also sent a letter requesting that the USDA start processing the request before a final damage report is compiled.

The state's Office of Emergency Services initiated a request to USDA for emergency loans to be made available to farmers and ranchers who sustained economic losses due to the heat.

"I want to seek the kind of help that was given after Hurricane Katrina," Schwarzenegger said.

Bill Mattos, president of the California Poultry Federation in Modesto, said poultry losses in the Central Valley, Kern to Sacramento, total about 750,000 chickens and 200,000 turkeys.

"In a normal heat cycle, we might lose 50,000 birds a week," Mattos said. "We lost five times that many."

Hardest hit were smaller operations that may not have had top-grade cooling systems, he said. Mattos said the loss amounts to about \$1 million to farmers for chickens, or about \$3 million in retail value. For turkeys, it would be more than \$2 million on the farm, or more than \$5 million at the retail level.

"We've had major losses from heat in the past," he said. "This was the most dramatic for a short

period of time."

Documenting losses proved challenging. Many farmers buried or composted cows - a practice allowed by temporary emergency action - and the industry is relying on ranchers and dairy operators to disclose details on those deaths.

As for crop loss, in the words of Tulare County Assistant Agricultural Commissioner Bill Appleby: "It's not like hail damage, where you can go out and see it. Some you might not see until harvest, because there may be internal damage."

Perhaps hardest hit were processing tomatoes. Industry leaders say those losses could run into the millions.

Some walnuts may have been sunburned, but industry leaders are saying the damage is not as severe as initially thought.

"We can't see the nuts that are on the top from the ground," said Doug Verboon, a Hanford grower. "We won't know about those until the harvest."

Some growers took the precaution of applying a white compound called Surround that may keep the trees and nuts cooler.

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*The Sacramento Bee's Jim Downing contributed to this report.*